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THE INVESTIGATION OF SCULPTURAL FORMS

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August 28, 1970

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is a consideration of some of the aesthetic and technical requirements involved in the process of working with draped slab sculptural forms. I have chosen to fire these pieces using the raku process, for I feel that this technique has a character that will enhance these forms.

In this brief introduction I would like to explain my personal philosophy of contemporary ceramics. It would be the worst sort of hypocrisy to refuse to recognize that a new permissiveness has already been in the process of freeing us from aesthetic prejudice. This prejudice has tended to erode our judgement and dilute our understanding of what is truly significant in working with clay. Whereas respectable opinion once could not accept artistic innovation, it now embraces not only serious innovation, but even the most mindless increment in artistic novelty. Despite the obvious ironies, I believe that this may be an advance in human enlightenment.

The work contained in my thesis is representational of the work

that I have been doing for the past several months. Every object that I create is an experiment, not only a test for the materials, but also a test for the viewer. This is so because the statement that I am making is not only in the object itself, but also in the concept of that object. I also believe that at present my work is merely a statement of a point in time and an indication of a direction of my involvement with these objects.

What we are confronting today is a radical change in taste that aspires to become a radical change in art. For myself, I doubt that the nature of art has changed, but I do not doubt that we stand today in a relation to art that is very different from the relation that formerly existed. In the past, art separated itself from common experiences even as it drew on common experience with an immense pride in its own unique prerogatives. This separation was reflected in the materials which artists used, in the refinement of their craftsmanship they developed, and in the complexity of the ideas and emotions they lavished on their art. The very concept of art signified a certain elevation from the common ground.



Conventions of style and technique reinforced the pride and conviction with which art remained aloof from the common environment. In more than one sense, art was more precious than it now is capable of being, or even has the desire to be.¹

¹Hilton Kramer, "The Emperor's New Bikini," Art in America, Jan-Feb, 1969, p. 49.



II. INSPIRATION AND EXECUTION DIFFICULTIES

I will now discuss how I became interested in the objects that I make and the technique which I use in their creation.

About six months ago I found a large plastic form in a junk heap. It had two very large breast-like projections on it. I thought that by dropping a slab over this form that I could come up with an object that resembled a sort of surrealistic landscape.

At this point, I had in mind what I wanted; but technically I was held back in terms of successfully completing the form. I felt that with sufficient experimentation I would be able to develop an image which was basically my own.

After several attempts at draping the slabs over this plastic form I was able to get one object, at least to the kiln. The biggest problem I had at this point was uneven drying. Because the underside of my slab was against





plastic, it would dry the slowest and the top surface would develop cracks.

The other problem that I encountered was my clay body. Because I had planned on firing my pieces raku, the clay body used was extremely porous and contained a significant amount of non-clay material. The clay body was also extremely short. The following is the clay body recipe that I began with:

Tennessee No. 5 Ball Clay	15
Cedar Heights "Goldart" Clay	30
Spodumene	5
Flint	5
North American Fire Clay	25
Grog (fine)	20

Using this clay for slabs two and one-half to three feet square and draping them was almost impossible without developing several cracks. Even if the object made it through drying and bisquing, it would surely come apart in the glaze firing. The following are two alternate clay bodies which I use, both have been very successful:

A. P. Green "Missouri" Fire Clay	25
Cedar Heights "Goldart" Clay	30
Kentucky "Special" Ball Clay	15
Spodumene	5
Grog	20

A. P. Green "Missouri" Fire Clay	100
Grog	40
Kentucky "Special" Ball Clay	40
Spodumene	20
Bentonite	1

After I was able to complete a few crude forms, I began thinking of better ways to achieve the image I wanted and also be able to change the shapes somewhat and not have to rely on an already-made object to drape my slabs on or into. I think the biggest change in my work occurred after seeing the work of Dave Middlebrook from Iowa and also watching Steve Kemenyffy demonstrate at R. I. T. Steve suggested that I try draping my slabs over large wads of crinkled-up newspaper. In this way the piece would dry more evenly and also would be able to shrink without any restriction. I was now able to make several forms quite rapidly, but I felt that they needed more work before I could gain any degree of satisfaction from them. At this point I stopped working on these forms for about a month and thought about them constantly in terms of what I could do with these objects to make them more complete. I also began to think about color and whether I would use glaze as an integral part of the image or just as a slight decoration



David Middlebrook



or decorative addition. At this point I decided that I would use glazes in a very minimal sense and let the smoking effect of the raku process decide surface quality. I will discuss the glazes that I did use at a later point. I also had to think about how I would glaze and also how I would fire because most of the pieces would be much longer and wider than high. This meant the construction of a raku kiln the shape and size of which would fire the most efficiently for the pieces I have made.

When I began working again, after thinking about my pieces, I had decided on a few changes which to me made a significant improvement in my work. The first change was size. I decided to reduce the size of my pieces. The larger pieces were no more aesthetically pleasing than the smaller ones, but were more difficult to remove from the kiln. They were much harder to work with all the way around. I also decided at this point to use two objects adjacent to each other. In this way I was able to break up the mass of my pieces in an interesting way, maybe even in a curious way. My finished pieces created quite an array of comments as to the relationship between the two parts. I personally feel that the two



Mr. Kemenyffy

objects make the sculptural image complete, possibly more environmental.

They tend to lose their landscape quality and become more animal-like.

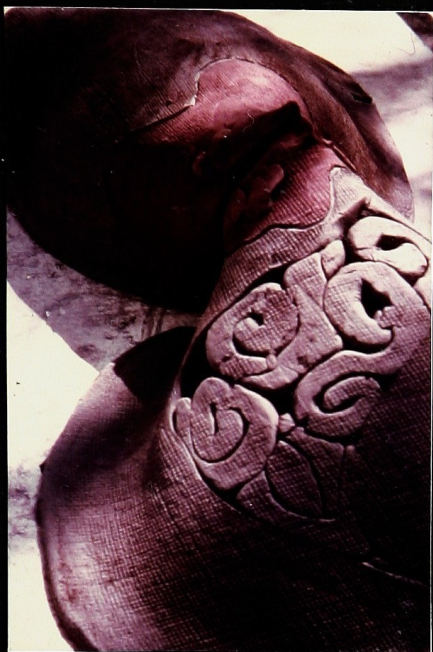


III.DECORATION AND GLAZING

It was at this point that I began to decorate the surface of my pieces by applying and inlaying decoration in the form of coils and ribbon-like appendages. I also incised into the surface of the clay a particular design which I later filled in with slip. This may be seen in some of the photographs. Many of my decorative motifs are quite distinctive of the work of Steve Kemenyffy.

In the photographs of my work there can be seen a few forms which do not follow the same pattern as the others, these were intermittent experiments with what I call "bag" forms. These forms are built like the name suggests, like bags laid on their sides, wrinkled, twisted, decorated, and then cut in two. I would have continued with this image a little further, but I ran into a technical problem which I had not the time nor the desire to solve.

Now I think I should discuss why I fired my pieces raku. To begin with I feel that raku is a whole way of working with clay, which for me is very comfortable, and this is more important to me than the results



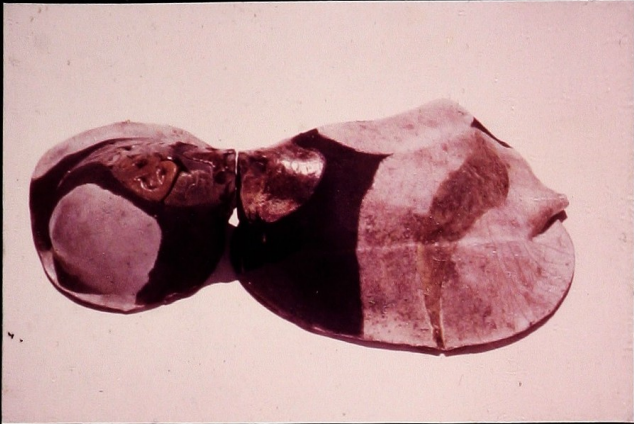
of raku. I enjoy the immediacy of the process. I think the results of the process fit my work very well because now I think raku even before my pieces are conceived, not in terms of glazes, but in terms of the process and the demands which raku requires. In short the process fits my own working temperament quite well. I do not look at raku as a limiting process . Raku is relatively new in the United States and everyday new and exciting things are happening, despite what some people say about it. For example Glenn Nelson says in his book CERAMICS, A POTTER'S HANDBOOK, "Because of the grog and the firing procedures, the form and size of raku ware is limited." This statement today cannot be further from the truth. I personally feel that the most absurd thing I have ever read about raku is Daniel Rhodes' statement in his book CLAY AND GLAZES FOR THE POTTER , "Raku has perhaps more usefulness as a means of demonstrating pottery making than as a means of producing ware, since the finished raku pot is in no way different than an ordinary pot except that it is under-fired, soft, and bears the scar of the tongs, which mar the glaze when the



Mr. Kemenyffy

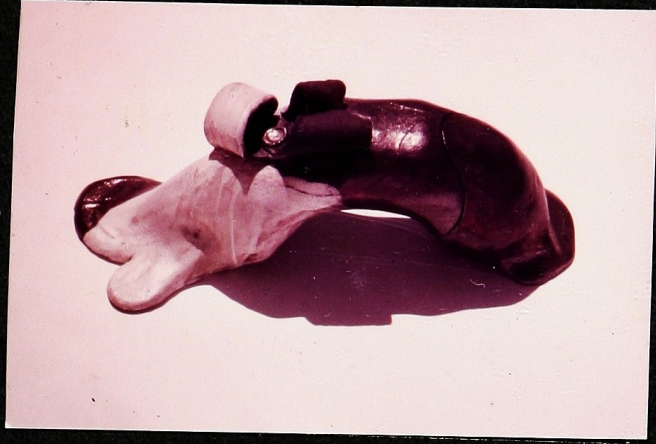
piece is taken from the kiln." If anyone has ever attended any contemporary ceramics show, they will understand why a statement like the previous one needs no comment.

I have said previously that I use glaze in a minimal way. This is true in most cases. There were times when I have experimented more with color, but usually what I do is incise a particular design into the greenware and later just brush in a little color and let the smoking take care of the rest of the piece. Possibly one reason why I used so little glaze was that the colors were far from being very subtle. I used mainly two glazes, a bright gold and a high copper glaze and sometimes black and white slip. The glazes which I have used are very high luster glazes with a highly iridescent quality. The following is a list of the three base glazes I have used and some of the possible colorants. At this point, I must say that I have done very little research with these glazes. All the credit for the glazes must go to a fellow graduate student, Richard Hirsch.









Base A

Soda Ash	42.2
Colemanite	30.9
Borax	18.6
Kaolin	24.0
Flint	65.0
Tin	6.0

Base B

Frit P25	43.6
Frit 3134	26.3
Lithium Carb.	9.9
Kaolin	6.2
Flint	14.0

Base C

Soda Ash	44.2
Gerstley Borate	30.9
Kaolin	24.0
Flint	65.0

Gold can be made by adding 1 % Bismuth Sub Nitrate and 1 % Silver Nitrate to Base A or Base B or Base C. Red Copper can be made by adding 2% Bismuth Sub Nitrate and 2 % Red Copper Oxide to Base A or Base B or Base C.

For a good Vitrious Engobe for raku, use the following:

Tennessee Ball Clay	20
Flint	30
Frit 3191	25
Talc	10

Also the following may be added to the base for Copper Iridescent

Luster:

Cupric Nitrate	2%
Silver Nitrate	1%
Bismuth Tri Nitrate	5%

Although all of these bases are very good, I prefer Base A.

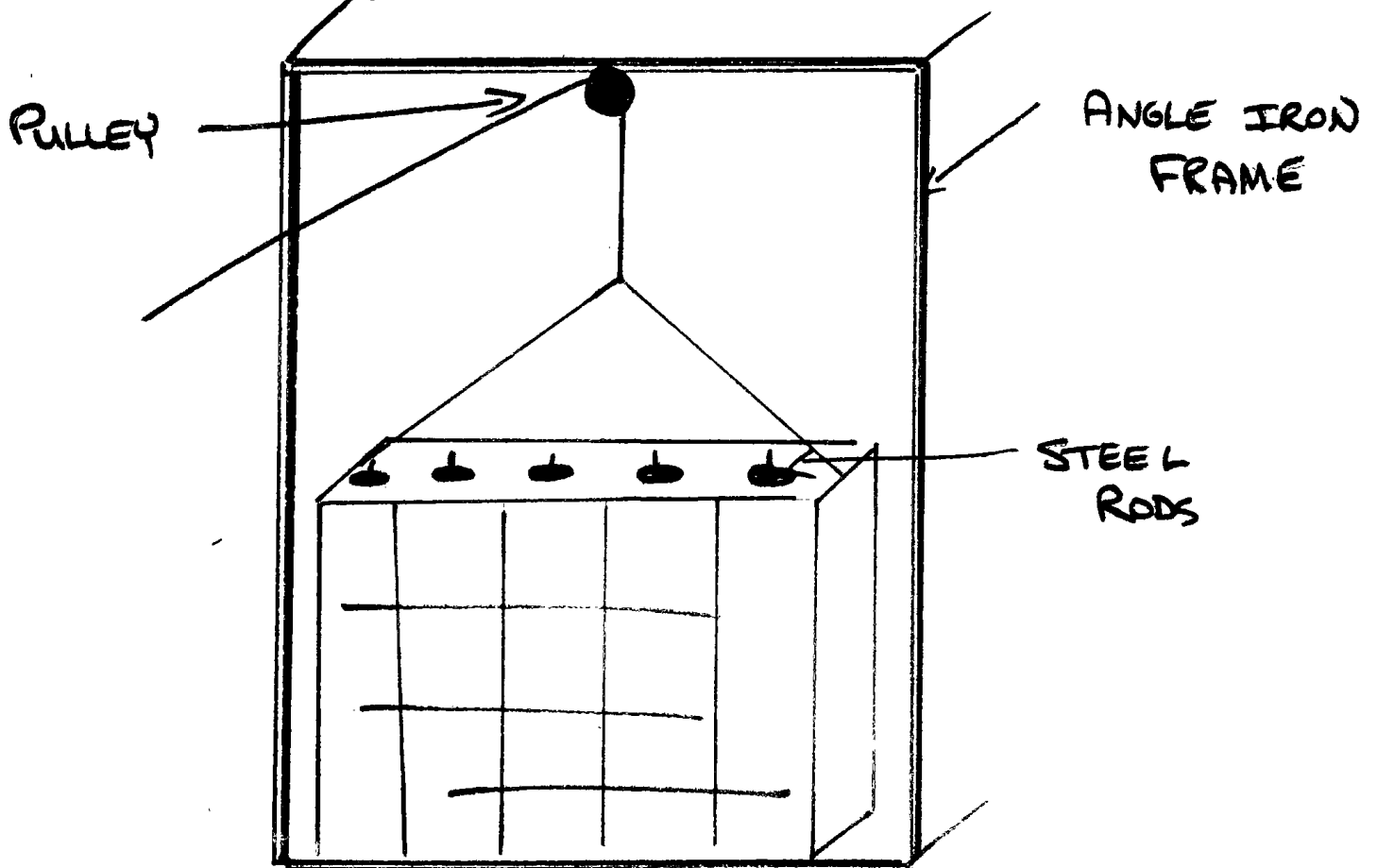
Also experiments were conducted with Cobalt Nitrate for blue, Cadmium Sulphide for red, and Manganese Chloride for purple to the above bases. Bismuth Sub or Tri Nitrate was added in 1 % to 2 % quantities for iridescence.



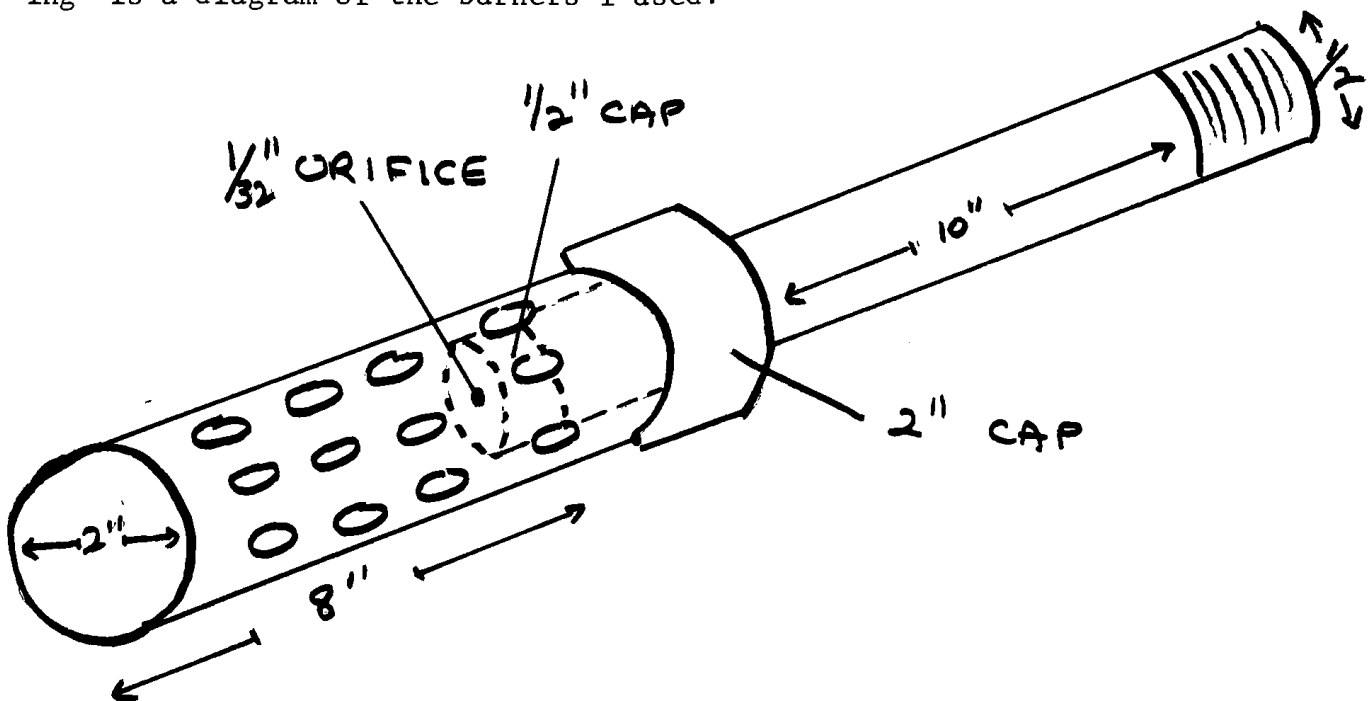
IV. KILN CONSTRUCTION

In my first design I had corbeled the kiln completely, but the kiln was not very durable. Being made of soft firebrick, it was very light. When I would drag my pieces out of the kiln and nudge the sides, the roof would sag. To remedy this I bought two hard fire slabs which are very heavy. I corbled the kiln part way up and placed the slabs on top. This made the kiln very solid.

The door of my kiln was constructed as follows:



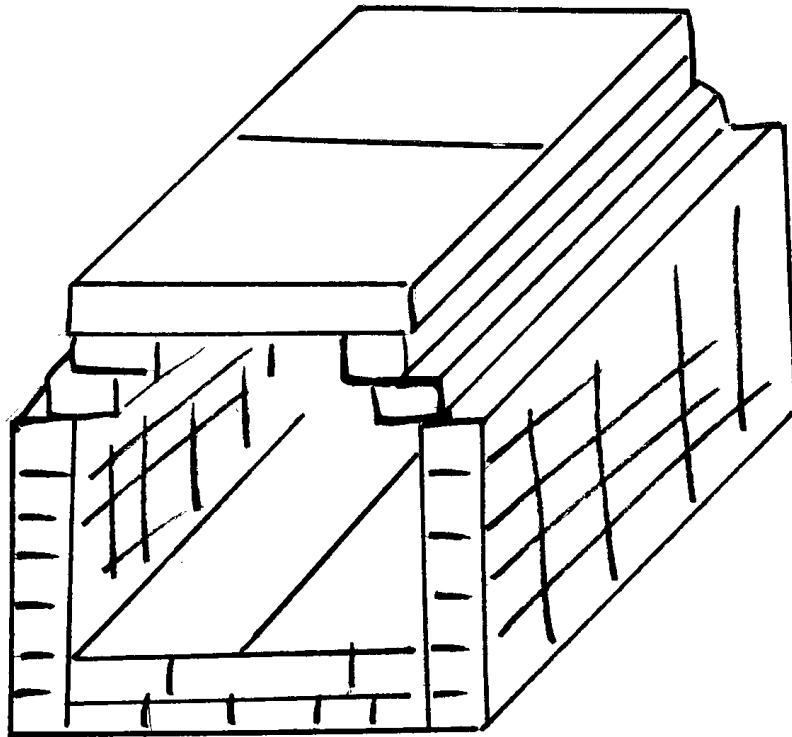
The forms that I have made were very difficult to remove from the kiln because of their size. I also had trouble with uneven heating. I had to construct a kiln in which I could fire my pieces in the most efficient way. The other problem that I had to cope with was the necessity of working alone. This caused me to go through all the steps and get my piece into the sawdust before the glaze solidified. I fired most of my pieces in my home studio and I used liquid propane for fuel. The following is a diagram of the burners I used.



I used two of these burners to fire a raku kiln of approximately four cubic feet. I took about one hour to reach 1800 degrees F., starting with a cold kiln. After the kiln was hot, it only took about one half hour

per firing. I let the kiln cool down quite a bit before reloading, because I had spent so much time per piece I thought that I should be extra cautious in the firing.

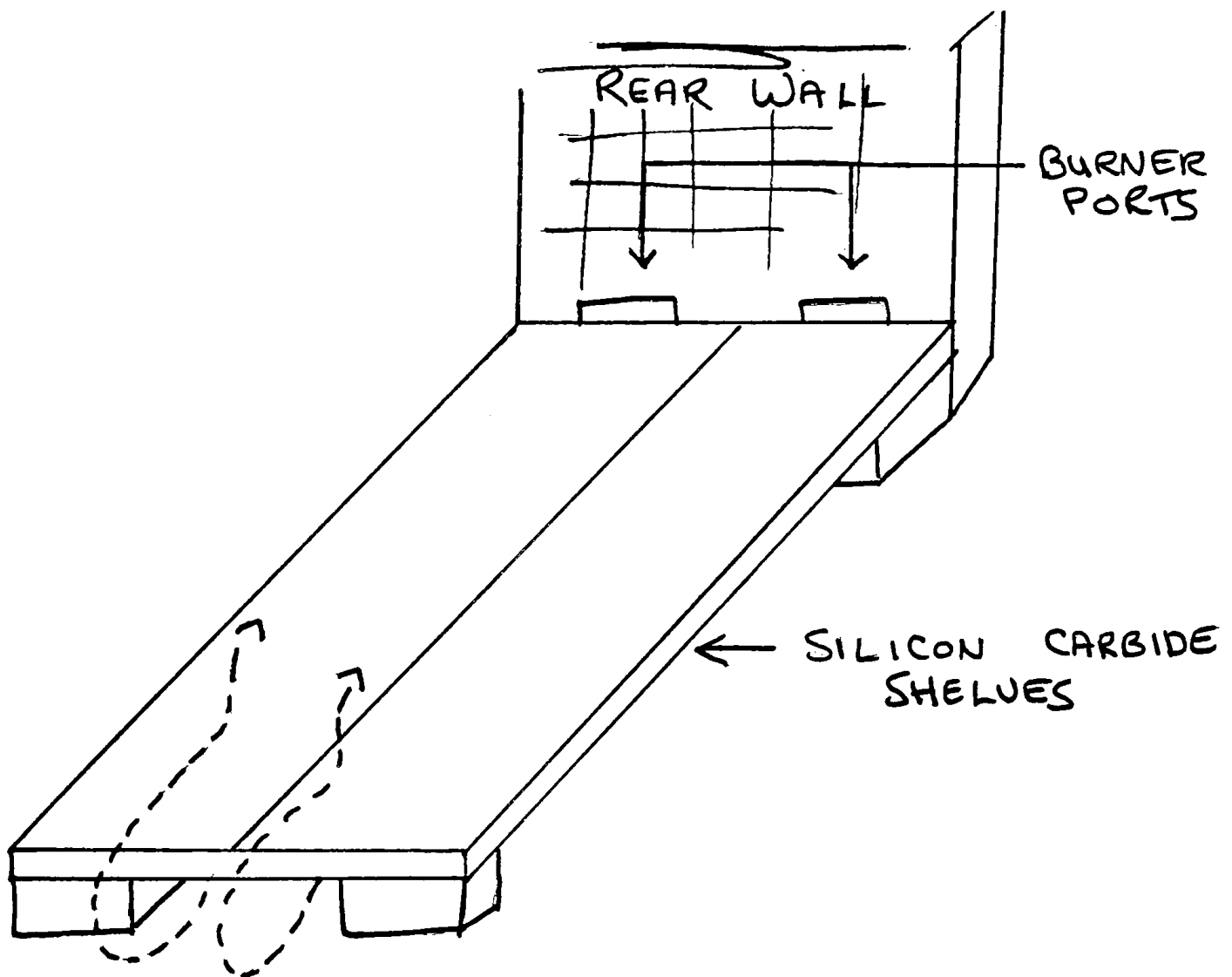
The following is a diagram of the raku kiln that I built to accomodate my work and also an explanation of ways I made certain modifications.



The kiln was approximately 36 inches deep and 24 inches wide and 16 inches high. I did not need the height.

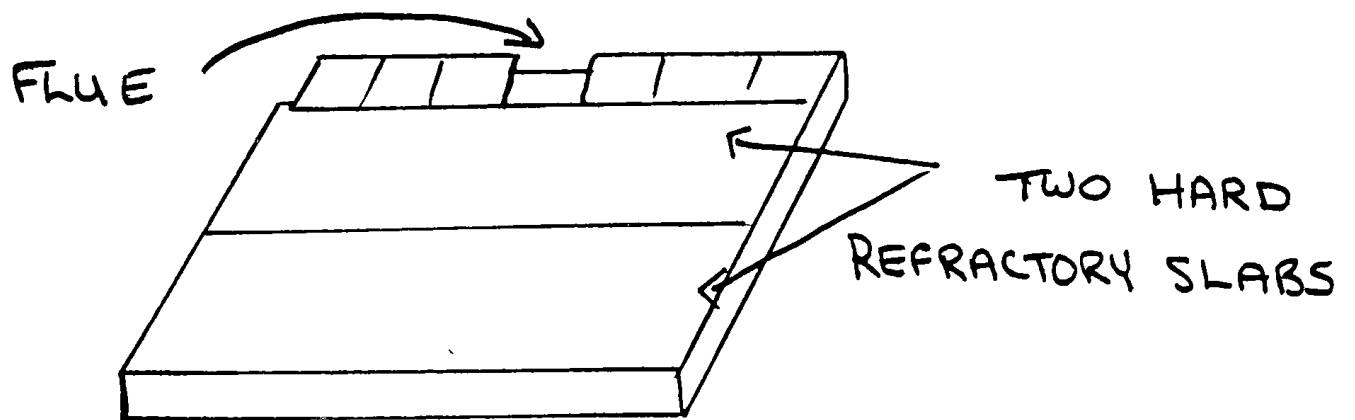
The first problem that arose was uneven heating. I solved this problem with the following floor arrangement.



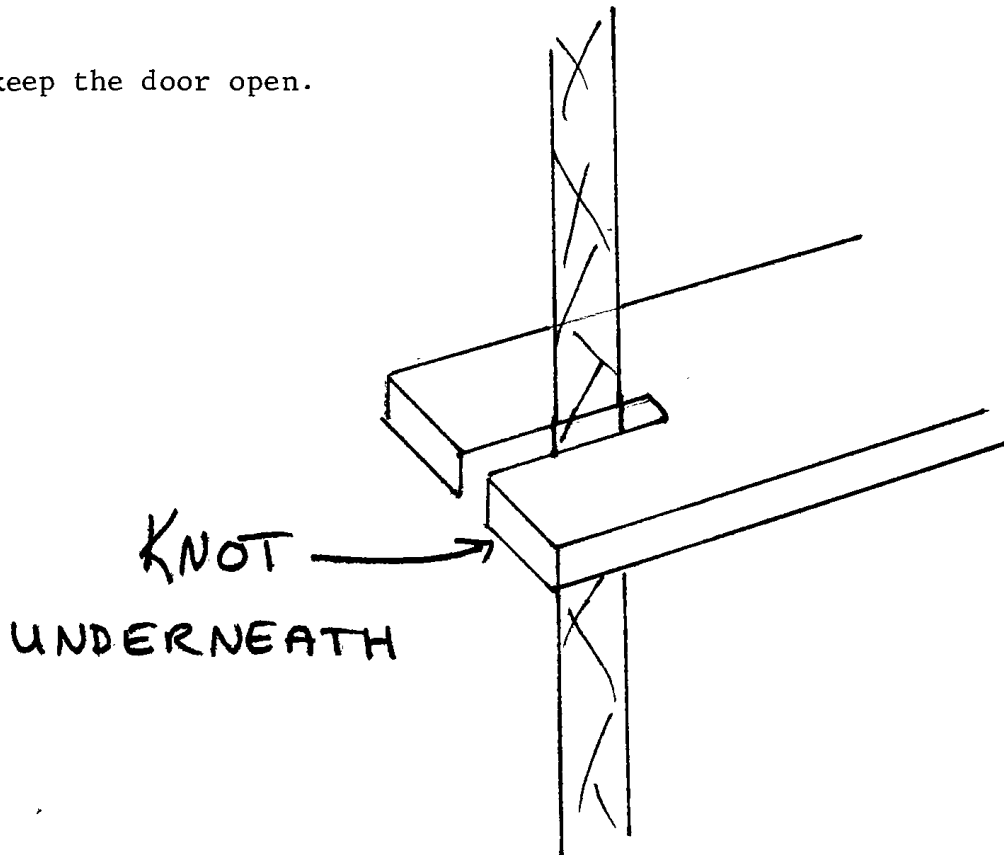


The flame travelled under the floor, through the ware and out through a flue in the rear of the kiln.

The following is a top view of the kiln.

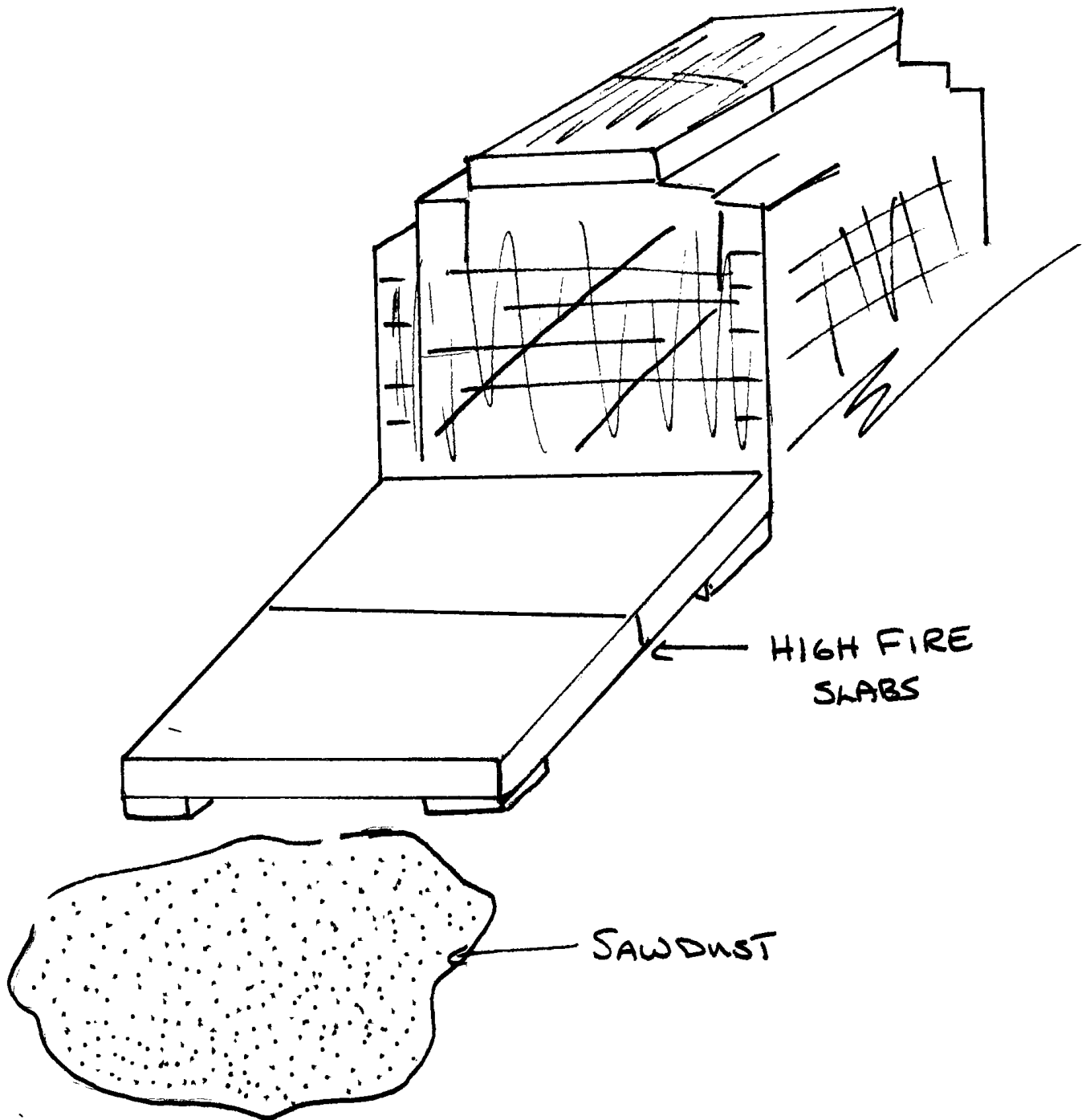


I put firebrick on threaded steel rods, then I encased the whole works in an angle iron frame. I put a piece of steel cable accross the top which was connected to a pulley. In this way I could lift the door in one fast motion. The cable had a knot in it which I could hook into a groove to keep the door open.



In the front of the kiln I placed two fire slabs at the same level as the kiln floor. In this way when the door was open I could hook my pieces with tongs and drag them out, all without lifting the piece. In front of the slabs was a bed of sawdust which cushioned the drop. I then covered the piece with a large galvanized wash tub which fit over my

pieces quite well.



V.CONCLUSION

The work that I have completed up to this point has been done in three phases. The first phase was the conceptual development of this particular image for me. The second phase was the point when I decided to do my work in adjoining sections. The third phase was when I decided to use a cast object with my forms, more specifically, a pair of cast lips. These last few pieces that I did now take on a more "funky" feeling. Also they became more phallic looking. This can be more clearly seen in my photographs. I tried to group my work chronologically. I think at this point my work was a real test, it no longer was an interesting organic rock form, but now contained just enough familiar parts and resembling



appendages to make some passers-by blush. others scowl, and still others to stop and really get into talking about the things that I do and the things that they do.

Some of this talk is a waste of time, sometimes people would be better off working and not talking. But sometimes being able to intellectualize about your work honestly is good, especially today when most contemporary imagery cannot stand by itself without the concept being revealed verbally. I believe, in terms of the work being done today, the question why the work was done is as important, if not more important than if the work conforms to some previously stated criteria of sculpture. This is because a person's reasons for doing the things he does are far less disputable than an age old criteria for which some ancient historian has labelled. For example, Art should have beauty, i.e. objects without beauty are not art. Poor Clayton Bailey, Peter Voulkos, James Leedy, Bob Arneson, and a whole list of others. These people do what is important to them. Many of their images are personal and they are allowed to be creative because of a new freedom which does not dictate Bauhaus standards.

Today creativity is not stifled by rules, today there are other glazes than black and white; there are super bright brown and pink. They can be purchased from Standard Ceramic Supply Company in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, commercially prepared. This is why I say my work is a test. I am constantly testing the rules of "ceramics." I ask questions of my work.

Should my objects be containers? Should they be in a garden or in a show? Should I use cast objects? Should I use a commercial glaze just because it is the best that I have ever seen for what I need? Is my art lasting or is what I do even called art? These are my tests for the rules of "ceramics."

The viewer, on the other hand is always being tested. Will he accept what I do, what will he say? Here are some examples of comments.

These things look like two people kissing. Can I pet one? They are neat!

Do you think Frans will like them? I really have more trouble having my work accepted by other ceramicists than I do by people in other areas of art. I do not know whether this is good or bad. All that I know is that if I had to constantly create the same object, day after day, that object

would lose its vitality and boredom would drive me to another medium.

Today the lines between the various art forms are closing. The useful object has a legitimacy as well as the useless object. Our whole civilization is moving towards a more existentialistic philosophy of life. The areas of reality and unreality are crossing. The horizons of the potter are expanding. Modern technology has changed many aspects of the chemistry of clay. Without the new advances in clay chemistry, our moon space program would be at a standstill. Perhaps the marriage of the artist and technician, "the two cultures" of C. P. Snow is finally coming to pass.

The potter in today's world has gone beyond the stage of craftsmanship. Ceramics can now function in man's life as all other art forms, as record, as enhancement, as communication, as integration, as discovery, and as intensification.

My thesis has attempted to show how a simple hand-building technique, can lead to the development of a very personal statement in clay about contemporary life.

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